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NORTH CHICAGO -- Retired astronaut James Lovell joined U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, and a number of high-ranking Navy officers marked the beginning of construction of the veterans and naval hospital on Monday.

Kirk reminisced about how plans to close the hospital were scuttled and then, once a combined hospital for veterans and active-duty personnel and their dependents was realized, he didn't want one of those weird acronym names for the facility.

Hero astronaut

Cong. Mark Kirk unveiled a huge portrait of retired astronaut James Lovell that will be placed in the lobby of the hospital when it is completed in 2010.

Lovell recently published a book, "Lost Moon," concerning the courageous mission of Apollo 13 that was made into a movie in 1995. His crew successfully modified their lunar module when the oxygen system failed. His family opened Lovell's of Lake Forest in 1999, where patrons dine among NASA-related artifacts and posters.

"I could see the name in documents 'NVANCMC,'" said Kirk as the 500 people around him laughed. "I wanted to have a 10th District hero lend his name to the facility, and that way no future bureaucrat could ever be able to close down our hospital" -- the James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center.

The \$71 million ambulatory care center is set to open in July 2010 as a four-story addition to the existing medical center. There was also a ribbon-cutting for the newly completed parking garage. The departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs built the hospital together, the first joint effort of this size.

Kirk, a Naval Reserve intelligence officer, credited veterans Johnnie Allen and Phil Mazur with

taking up the battle to preserve the hospital after a Veterans Affairs Department study called for the virtual elimination of in-patient programs at the VA Medical Center.

"To all of you wonderful guys (veterans), stand up and be recognized. I just want to say you saved our country's butt, and now it's time for us to save yours," he said.

Kirk also praised Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Gordon Mansfield.

"But for you, we would not be here today," said Kirk.

Also honored in pushing the project through were Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Stephen Jones, Vice Commander, Navy Reserve Forces Command Donald Gintzig.

"I'm quite humbled," Lovell said, citing a letter from a Marine who had served in Iraq who praised the astronaut. Lovell said it was he who should be honored.

"To me, you are the present-day hero. These are trying times in military history, and we need to pass our patriotism on to our kids," he said. "May this federal health-care center serve our military's both past and present."

"Time will tell," Marine veteran Mike Decker of Zion said of the combined hospital for veterans, active-duty sailors and their dependents.

Kirk said that group represents about 100,000 people.

By combining the Naval base health-care facility and the veterans hospital, the general taxpayer and those who use the facility will reap the benefits, said Dr. Tariq Hassan, chief of staff for the hospital.

"We've been able to expand the scope of the surgery we perform already. Everyone benefits," he said.